

ONLINE ACCESS CENTRE SUSTAINABILITY

FINAL REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP

OF THE

ONLINE COUNCIL STANDING COMMITTEE

July 2005

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Subject	Page
Acronyms	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	7
Section 1 - Background	
Working Group History and Context	8
Australian Networks and Models	10
State, Territory and Local Governments	11
Section 2 – Sustainability Strategy Development and Outcomes	13
Strategy 1 – Delivery of access to Govt services through OACs	
Australian Networks and Models	14
State, Territory and Local Governments	14
Internet Security and Privacy	16
Strategy 2 – Funding Programs	
Australian Networks and Models	18
State, Territory and Local Governments	20
Strategy 3 – Flexibility of existing programs	22
Strategy 4 – Dissemination of practical information	22
Telinfo	22
Strategy 5 – Stocktake of OACs funded under NTN	
Stocktake	23
Survey	24
Strategy 6 – Community Participation	
Australian Networks and Models	26
State, Territory and Local Governments	27

Strategy 7 – Private Sector Participation	
Australian Government Initiatives	33
State and Territory Initiatives	34
Section 3 – Future Issues	
Social Capital Building	38
Building ICT Skills and Capabilities	38
Internet access and use in Australia	39
Access to broadband and applications	41
Access to online services and e-government	41
Future viability of OACs	42
Indigenous OACs	42
Success factors to consider	43
Conclusion	45
References	46
Attachment A – Seven Strategies	48
Attachment B – Working Group Members	49
Attachment C – Telinfo E-card	50
Attachment D – Stocktake	51
Attachment E – Survey Questions	53
Attachment F – Survey Results	54-60

ACRONYMS

ACC	Area Consultative Committee
ACCI	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
AP	Anangu Pitjantjatjara (Lands)
ASCCA	Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association
CAICTS	Community Access to ICTs in Schools
CCIF	Coordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund
CDMA	Code Division Multiple Access (Telephone network)
CITAP	Community IT Access Plan
CBP	Community Business Partnership
CSIA	Community Information Strategies Australia Inc
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CTC	Community Technology Centre
CTLIC	Community Technology Learning Centres
DCITA	Department of Communications, IT and the Arts
DEST	Department of Education, Science and Training
DOTARS	Department of Transport and Regional Services
EFTPOS	Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale
FaCS	Family and Community Services
HiBIS	Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IKC	Indigenous Knowledge Centres
IT	Information Technology
ITSWG	Indigenous Telecommunications Services Working Group
LNQ	Learning Network Queensland
NFP	Not For Profit
NTN	<i>Networking the Nation</i>
OAC	Online Access Centre
OPAL	Online Public Access in Libraries
QGAP	Queensland Government Agent Program
RP	Regional Partnership
RTC	Rural Transaction Centres
RTI	<i>Regional Telecommunications Inquiry</i>
SFIE	Strategic Framework for the Information Economy
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TAPRIC	Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities
TCN	Tasmania's Community Net
TCO	Tasmanian Communities Online
UP	Unlimited Potential Program

Online Access Centre Sustainability

Final Report of the Working Group of the Online Council Standing Committee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Both Government and non-government organisations have invested substantial resources in establishing and operating community online access centres (OACs) in Australia. This Report represents the completed work of the OAC Sustainability Working Group, set up by Online Council Officials in March 2004, to develop strategies for the sustainability of these OACs in relation to Recommendation 5.5 of the *Regional Telecommunications Inquiry* (RTI).

Recommendation 5.5 states that:

All tiers of government should work together to support online access centres in regional, rural and remote Australia, and to enable these important community facilities to remain viable. (p 197)

The Australian Government accepted the Recommendation and responded that:

The Government will work with Online Council on strategies to maintain the viability of online access centres, including those in remote Indigenous communities.

The Working Group developed and used seven strategies in addressing the issues relating to OAC sustainability (see **Attachment A**). These strategies allowed for a comprehensive analysis of possible existing funding sources, opportunities for revenue raising and cost reduction for OACs, and better information flow.

The Working Group strongly recommends that the Online Council of Ministers consider the issues discussed in the Report, which provide some future directions in continuing the efforts of a whole of government approach to sustainable OACs. In this context, the Working Group also recommends that the Report is distributed to other Ministerial Councils in order that the cross- portfolio nature of the role and viability of OACs is fully addressed.

The following list contains a summary of the OAC Working Group activities that relate to each of the seven strategies -

- Liaison with other government agencies and departments to ensure that all relevant areas of government have an awareness of OACs and their role as a resource for providing online access to government services (Strategy 1).
- The identification and promotion by all tiers of government of programs and initiatives which OACs can currently access for further funding (Strategy 2).
- Investigation of the options for the provision of support for OACs through other existing government funded programs (Strategy 3).
- The development and promotion of web pages, hosted through the Department of Communications, IT and the Arts (DCITA) TelInfo website. These pages provide practical and useful information on maintaining community owned and operated

OACs and allow for information sharing and exchange at a national level (Strategy 4).

- The completion of a stocktake of all *Networking the Nation* (NTN) funded OACs. This has given the Working Group a clearer understanding of the operational status of these centres. The data indicates that a majority of projects providing public Internet access remain open in some form. However, as not all centres could be contacted directly, this meant that some OACs operational status is unknown (Strategy 5).
- The completion of a survey by 351 centres (sent to 1,023 out of the 1,822 NTN funded locations). This research has provided a more in-depth picture of the range of OACs in operation, success factors, and the kinds of user groups visiting those sites. The majority of those surveyed reported a high reliance on volunteer staff, the importance of co-location for many centres, and demonstrated the significance of being part of a state-wide network (Strategy 5).
- The encouragement of all tiers of government to continue to develop and foster community and private sector participation through various initiatives and programs (Strategies 6 and 7).

The Working Group has also identified the unique role that OACs play in providing information and communications technology (ICT) access and skills to individuals and groups, as well as engaging communities and the private sector in building social and economic networks. These unique elements clearly provide many reasons for the continued support by all tiers of government.

The Working Group concluded that many OACs would not be sustainable without continuing external support. A number of funding streams have been identified, including income generated from local communities and the private sector, fees for government service delivery and grants from existing government programs. While OACs have the potential to generate income through these services, the amount will not be sufficient to cover their essential costs.

Ongoing support is required to address the findings and recommendations of the Online Access Working Group to help ensure the survival of Online Access Centres. The Working Group considers that any further government support should be based on a range of models, including some ongoing annual funding for OACs servicing those communities most disadvantaged in accessing the Internet and developing ICT skills. These OACs tend to be located in areas of high need (eg. in terms of remoteness, income, cultural barriers, unemployment etc).

These socio-economic needs fall within the portfolio responsibilities of a number of government departments and agencies at the state, territory and Federal levels. It is necessary for each of these organisations to maintain a range of mechanisms to address the viability of OACs. It will be important to ongoing policy and program development considerations that the performance and sustainability of OACs is kept under review.

INTRODUCTION

The OAC Sustainability Working Group was set up by the Online Council Standing Committee in March 2004, to develop strategies for the sustainability of OACs in relation to Recommendation 5.5 of the *Regional Telecommunications Inquiry* (RTI). This work has specifically involved the identification and assessment of short, medium and long term strategies to provide solutions to the barriers to sustainability faced by many OACs in rural, regional and remote Australia.

The Working Group, through this process, has emphasised the importance of OACs as community resources, which provide unique economic and social benefits, beyond simply providing information technology (IT) access and training. The work has also pinpointed commonalities and patterns influencing the successful and viable operation of OACs, as well as the unique differences (such as location and communities) between OACs. The Report provides a firm foundation on which to build future efforts to secure the sustainability of OACs in regional Australia. The Report highlights the roles in this context for all tiers of government and the community and private sectors.

Drawing on the research and analysis of the Working Group, and the experience of developing these sustainability strategies, Section 1 of this Report provides a background to the formation of the Working Group and a definition of OACs. Section 2 provides an in-depth analysis of each of the seven strategy developed by the Working Group. Finally, Section 3 discusses the future sustainability of OACs, including reference to Indigenous OACs.

The Working Group endorses the commitment of all jurisdictions to OACs. The Group has clearly identified the range and variety of community needs and services that can be met by OACs. These needs fall within the portfolio of a number of government departments and agencies at the state, territory and Federal levels. It is necessary for each of these organisations to maintain a range of mechanisms to address the viability of OACs and for all levels of government to encourage the development of policies that will enhance the ongoing operation of these facilities.

In this context, the Working Group recommends that the Report be distributed to other Ministerial Councils in order that the cross portfolio nature of the role and viability of OACs is fully addressed. This would better reflect Recommendation 5.5 of the RTI and assist OACs to grow and develop beyond their initial role as Internet access points to life-long learning centres, and facilities for the community to access a wide range of services and community capacity building hubs.

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

Working Group – history and context

The viability of OACs funded under the NTN Program was raised in the *Connecting Regional Australia* report of the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (the 2002 ‘Estens Report’, Recommendation 5.5).

Recommendation 5.5 states that “*All tiers of government should work together to support online access centres in regional, rural and remote Australia, and to enable these important community facilities to remain viable.*” (p 197)

The Australian Government accepted the recommendation and responded that: “*The Government will work with Online Council on strategies to maintain the viability of online access centres, including those in remote Indigenous communities.*”

In September 2003, the Online Council of Ministers endorsed cooperative action to address the viability of OACs and a Working Group was subsequently established by Online Council Officials in March 2004. The purpose of the Working Group was to develop a coordinated strategy, with input from all jurisdictions, to assist the ongoing viability of OACs, including those in remote Indigenous communities. In developing a coordinated strategy, the Working Group recognised the range of policy priorities held by various governments in relation to OACs, and the models for delivering sustainable access to the Internet that have already been established.

Consideration was given to:

- the need for a range of strategies to accommodate communities of various sizes, types of facilities and level of services;
- short term strategies which can provide immediate support and guidance to OACs;
- longer term strategies which may require government funding and/or leadership;
- the role of the respective tiers of government;
- the roles of community and private sectors; and
- the needs of remote and Indigenous communities.

In June 2004, the *Strategies for the Sustainability of Online Access Centres* paper was circulated to Online Council members. This progress report from the Working Group set a timetable for Tier 1 strategies to be produced by 30 September 2004, Tier 2 strategies by 30 November 2004, and a final report at the end of the Working Group’s mandate on 30 June 2005.

The Working Group has held five meetings and has also progressed work out-of-session.

See **Attachment B** for membership of the Working Group.

What are Online Access Centres (OACs)?

OACs are typically community owned and run, usually staffed by paid workers and/or volunteers, with centres providing a mix of services, including, but not limited to delivery of:

- *communication services* - the Internet, fax, email, videoconferencing and other online services and information;
- *computer services and applications* - PCs, CDs, DVDs, web cameras, printers, scanners, digital cameras, other electronic equipment, word processing applications, spreadsheets and small business applications and tools;
- *resource services* - technical support, desktop publishing, graphics applications, photocopying, laminating, secretarial and administrative support services;
- *education and training services* - basic ICT training, accredited training courses, TAFE and vocational training, industry and business training (i.e. microbusiness sector);
- *government services* - for all tiers of government (at Federal, state and local levels), including labour/work participation schemes such as *Work for the Dole*, telehealth and telelaw;
- *social development services* - support programs for youth, children, the aged and people with disabilities, and Internet cafés;
- *community development services* – community newspapers, bulletins, tourist and heritage information, library services; and
- *commercial services* - such as the hire of equipment, and facilities to community groups and businesses, web page design, training and education, and can also provide information on government services.

OACs are not only diverse in the services that they provide, they also vary in their operational profile and elements, and the clients they service. OACs can be networked at a regional or state level and/or be part of a school or library network which provides Internet access.

Others can be defined as stand alone, with no external organisation or management structure. Furthermore, both networked and stand alone centres may be co-located with other services such as libraries, other community services, government offices and/or council services.

Some centres target specific communities in remote and regional areas, for example centres that have been set up in Indigenous communities. However, whatever their size or range of services and programs they offer, OACs are a unique and specific community resource, which customises services for the benefit of their community.

Australian networks and models

Australian Government

NTN Program and OACs

The NTN Program provided \$350 million for more than 760 projects across regional, rural and remote Australia. Around \$61 million was allocated to projects which contributed to the establishment or continued operation of more than 2,000 public Internet access sites in a variety of locations, including libraries, schools and telecentres, in over 1,000 townships throughout regional Australia.

More than 290 NTN projects reported that they offered training in computer and Internet skills, training almost 950,000 people by June 2003. Of those trained, 11 per cent were reported to have pursued further training and up to 4 per cent subsequently found employment.

Rural Transaction Centres Programme

The Rural Transaction Centres (RTC) Programme was funded through the RTC Reserve established under the *Telstra (Further Dilution of Public Ownership) Act* (1999). \$70 million was allocated to this programme, with 239 RTCs approved and 142 RTC Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale (EFTPOS) facilities installed. The purpose of the RTC Programme was to assist smaller rural communities to have access to services and technology that enables them to obtain information and carry out transactions.

As at June 2005, about 170 RTCs are operating and providing services to their communities. The other RTC projects are still progressing to completion over the next few months.

The RTCs are operating under a number of different models. Some are stand-alone, some are operating under the umbrella of the Shire Council, others are managed by a community organisation and include other activities - health services, meeting facilities, post office agencies, professional offices, and community multi-use facilities.

Early RTC models funded at the beginning of the programme included running cost funding for the first year or two of operations, but did not necessarily provide funding for the RTC to purchase its accommodation. In later models, RTC facilities have been purchased or purpose built and the RTC group has been responsible for meeting the running costs of the RTC.

The funding of the RTC programme formally ended on 30 June 2005. Community groups or local councils seeking to establish an RTC in their community are encouraged to apply for funding from the Regional Partnerships Programme.

State, territory and local government

Besides the NTN and RTC Programs which provided seed funding for OACs and RTCs, state, territory and local governments have provided various kinds of support to programs offering public Internet access and IT training.

- From 2001-2005, the New South Wales Government funded the *Community Technology Centre (CTC)* Program support unit and a range of IT projects targeted to specific disadvantaged groups. After this period no further funding has been committed by the NSW Government for individual CTCs. However, the NSW Government has provided \$500,000 to the recently formed CTC Association, which will provide business planning and other support services to members.
- The Queensland Government continues to fund a range of ICT-based initiatives that aim to address community needs including: *Learning Network Queensland (LNQ)*; the *Online Public Access in Libraries (OPAL)* project; and *Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs)*.
- The South Australian Government has developed a collaborative approach, seeking ways to support community online access through a variety of existing networks such as the Public Library Network, Aboriginal study centres and NTN funded telecentres. The Digital Bridge Unit, Science Technology and Innovation Directorate, is focused on supporting initiatives for people living in rural and regional areas which will help overcome the digital divide. One strategy is to promote the role of OACs in this, and to seek resources to maintain this function in rural and remote areas.
- The Tasmanian Government provides \$1.9 million per annum in recurrent funding and central support to the 64 OACs in the Tasmanian Communities Online (TCO) network.
- Since 1999, the Victorian Government has funded a range of initiatives to provide public Internet access across the state under its *Connecting Communities* framework. The Victorian Government recently announced its second wave of *Connecting Communities* initiatives, including \$3.5 million to assist eligible OACs to continue to provide free and affordable public Internet access to disadvantaged groups.
- The Western Australian Government has committed \$1.96 million to support 97 operational Telecentres in the financial year 2004-05 (distributed in the form of a \$20,000 wages grant) to ensure facilities are open for a minimum of 20 hours each week. Lotterywest is also a significant supporter of the Telecentre Network.
- The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) does not include any regional, rural and remote areas (as defined by Online Council) and was not a Member of the OAC Sustainability Working Group. However, the Territory has provided comment on this issue. In 2001, grants were provided to 19 ACT community organisations to establish public and community IT access facilities by building on their existing infrastructure.

In addition PCs were provided to public libraries and a limited number of schools for public IT access purposes. Simultaneously, an IT training program was

developed to provide free individual assistance to both staff of the recipient organisations and the users of these facilities.

In 2002, the ACT Chief Minister's Department, in consultation with the Community IT Advisory Group, developed the Community IT Access Plan (CITAP). This plan set out the Government's strategy for closing the Digital Divide in the ACT. The CITAP provides the strategic framework necessary to ensure equitable access to ICT and the Internet for all members of the ACT community, and contains a range of initiatives to be implemented over three years.

- Local Government continues to play a significant role as a facilitator and manager of many OACs. The level and type of support varies among and within states and territories. Many councils and shires do not have sufficient funding to financially support centres. However, many have provided in-kind support to NTN-funded projects.

Local government has hosted centres in local libraries and paid ongoing costs such as rent and maintenance, and have been active facilitators or managers of OACs. State and territory local government associations have also been involved, both directly and indirectly, in the establishment and ongoing support for OACs. For example, the Western Australian Local Government Association has coordinated the establishment of public Internet access point in libraries and continues to provide Internet connectivity to these libraries.

SECTION 2: SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND OUTCOMES

A number of strategies were identified by the Working Group to address the immediate pressures on OACs. Given the complexity of the issue these seven strategies were split into three tiers.

Tier 1

All tiers of government to:

- 1) continue and increase work with relevant agencies in their jurisdiction to encourage greater delivery of their services through OACs, taking into account the different State models;
- 2) identify existing funding programs that could be accessed by existing centres to help address any immediate funding needs – these programs to be promoted to centres;
- 3) explore how relevant existing programs can be made more flexible to support existing online access centres, eg re-engineering of existing program structures;

Tier 2

- 4) Australian Government to capture and disseminate useful and practical information to assist the Management Committees of online access centres;
- 5) All tiers of government to commence a stocktake of existing centres to get a better understanding of the current status of the centres. It is envisaged that the stocktake would make use of relevant mapping and spatial data tools.

Tier 3

- 6) State and local governments to develop initiatives to foster and sustain community participation.
- 7) All tiers of government to develop initiatives to foster private sector participation through local businesses.

The tiers were based on an ability to accomplish an outcome, with minimum resources, within the brief timeframe available. Tier 1 strategies were to be actioned immediately, whereas the processes to undertake Tiers 2 and 3 would require varying degrees of development, co-ordination and resourcing.

These strategies were developed based on three principles identified as underpinning the issues facing OACs:

Collaboration – strong co-ordination within and across jurisdictions at local, state and national level

Community Involvement – recognising the needs and capabilities of local communities

Resources – appropriate support (including in-kind), volunteers, private sector funding, and funding from all tiers of government

A discussion of each strategy, developed from the original terms of reference for the Working Group, and associated outcomes and initiatives follows.

Strategy 1 - Delivery of access to government services through OACs

All tiers of government to continue and increase work with relevant agencies in their jurisdiction to encourage greater delivery of their services through OACs, taking into account the different state models.

Australian Government initiatives

The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), as Secretariat for the Working Group, has liaised with various other government agencies and departments to ensure that all relevant areas of the Australia Government have an awareness of OACs and their role as a resource for providing access to online government services.

- The Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) has been an active member of the Working Group providing advice on *Regional Partnership (RP) Programme*, Regional Transaction Centres (RTCs) and their network of Area Consultative Committees (ACCs). Many OACs are co-located with RTCs, creating a hub for community transactions with government and other services online.
- DCITA has met with Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and provided various relevant areas of DEST with introductory information on OACs, emphasising the importance of keeping OAC managers up-to-date with new DEST programs and initiatives. DCITA has provided information on the locations of centres.
- The Working Group has liaised with Centrelink regarding its network of local community agents who are contracted to provide a variety of services on Centrelink's behalf. Centrelink has 500 sites across Australia.
- The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) operates a *Regional and Remote Program*, which contracts with established OACs in rural areas to deliver local help and access to a range of tax products and services. It has around 185 contracted OACs through all states in Australia.

State, territory and local government initiatives

State and territory governments have been involved in the work of developing and delivering e-government services through ICT initiatives, and specifically utilising OAC infrastructure for access to these services, over many years.

Australian Capital Territory

The ACT Government has a whole of government program, called *Canberra Connect*, in place to enable the community and businesses to deal with Government through a single point of access. *Canberra Connect's* information and services can be accessed

through shopfronts, Internet and telephone providing a single path to obtain information and services.

The ACT Government's CITAP includes public IT access through the development of CTCs and the placement of PCs in all ACT Public Libraries. CITAP also included:

- A PC Reuse Scheme.
- The distribution of PCs and other IT equipment to targeted individuals who lack the prerequisite skills to utilise public IT access.

New South Wales

The centralised secretariat of the NSW CTC Program has provided a fee-for-service allocation of \$5000 per annum from 2001-2003, reducing to \$1,100 per CTC in 2005, to offer free access to a dedicated computer defaulted to the website.¹ In 2004-2005, a range of services were delivered by CTCs for 13 government agencies and five non-government organisations. The NSW Government's future support for the CTCs will be based on fee-for-service delivery of government services to rural and regional communities. It is proposed that no further direct funding will be made available to individual CTCs.

Northern Territory

The Northern Territory Government has a whole-of-government program in place to deliver government services online. It will continue to encourage a more flexible approach to existing and new programs to meet the particular needs of the Territory.

Queensland

The Queensland Government currently delivers services to Queensland communities through long-established channels including *Queensland Government Agent Program* (QGAP) offices and Learning Network Queensland (LNQ) centres. These facilities address identified needs for access to government services (primarily Queensland Government services, as well as selected Commonwealth and other services), education and training services and public Internet access in rural and remote Queensland communities.

South Australia

Service SA continues to provide first-line e-Government services delivery points to South Australians through 17 centres throughout regional areas. Service SA is working to expand this network of Government service delivery outlets through collaborative programs. For example, service delivery is being provided through community-based facilities on Anangu Pitjantjatjara (AP) Lands (in conjunction with PY-KU program), and the rural agent and satellite service centre program which seeks to provide services through existing community OACs.

¹ www.nsw.gov.au.

Tasmania

Service Tasmania is the State Government's shopfront to government services with over 25 physical locations around the State as well as an online presence. Public internet access points in libraries, OACs and Service Tasmania shops are promoted as places to source online government information.

Victoria

In Victoria, OACs have been established in a range of community venues such as schools, libraries and neighbourhood houses. Given this range of organisations, the delivery and promotion of access to government services through OACs is not an appropriate model for Victoria. However, individual centres have pursued these opportunities where appropriate to their individual circumstances. Government services are promoted extensively through Victoria Online (the Victorian Government's portal) and Victorian Business Centres.

Western Australia

Western Australia's Telecentre Network commenced operation with three Telecentres in the Kimberley Region in 1992. The network now extends across the State with telecentres located in 105 communities, reaching into very remote Indigenous communities in some areas. Telecentres deliver a wide range of public and private sector services, including Centrelink, Health Insurance Commission Medicare Easyclaim, Westpac and ANZ with in-store banks, library services, Veteran's Affairs, the Office of Rural Health, ATO and Australia Post.

Local government

In regards to Tier 1 strategies, the role of local government in supporting OACs, while critical, is largely provided at community level through local councils and/or economic development organisations rather than through broad delivery of services and/or funding programs. Local government is, however, investigating delivery of more of its own services, such as planning, payment of fine and rates, etc. online.

Internet security and privacy

In the course of developing the strategy of government service delivery through OACs, the Working Group has been made aware of the issue of Internet security and privacy in regards to the use of public Internet centres for online activities such as banking and shopping. This issue was raised with the Working Group in relation to advice that had been provided by the Attorney-General's Department in a Fraud Prevention tool kit and in a subsequent media campaign by the Australian Bankers Association. This advice needs to be considered in the context of the OAC's knowledge of and capacity to minimise risks through appropriate ICT management, as well as the significant disadvantage suffered by those most in need of public facilities to conduct online business. In many instances, the public may be more at risk when using a private home computer than one in an OAC that has been provided with appropriate Internet security protection.

Although there are various online publications which address the issue of security and privacy in relation to individual and business users, the Working Group notes the need for targeted information for OAC users and managers. More work is required in this

area to ensure a consistent and practical way forward for secure online service delivery and public Internet access.

Summary

The delivery of access to government services through OACs is a strategy which continues to be pursued at all levels of government. The various models for OACs and telecentres in the states and territories indicate that there is a strong commitment to e-Government that provides that basis for further development. The Working Group notes that OACs provide a useful vehicle for introducing and making e-Government accessible to the wider community in regional areas and provide the vehicle to ensure the investment to develop this form of service delivery is realised through strong community access. However, it will take commitment by all levels of government to develop policy settings that will progress this strategy further.

Although there have been positive outcomes in pursuing this strategy, as outlined above, detailed examination of the capacity for OACs to raise revenue aside from government grants, revealed that there is limited capacity for OACs to attract additional income in the majority of small rural communities where they are established with thin markets. This is a significant obstacle to reassuring government of their capacity to provide an ongoing service in delivering government services and information as a service delivery point. The Working Group also notes that, while the delivery of access to government services through OACs is an important revenue source for many OACs, this is not appropriate for some states and territories, notably Victoria.

While some OACs may wish to explore the option of access to government service delivery as a means of increasing revenue, care needs to be taken to identify and assess this as a business case. In addition to this more discussion needs to be undertaken by all levels of government about developing policy in relation to utilising OAC and the community based models for the delivery of government services and programs, particularly the opportunities for e-government service delivery.

It should not be assumed that OACs which do not provide access to government service delivery have overlooked a readily available source of revenue in an environment where standards and overarching policy are unclear. The level of fees available from government agencies for the delivery of their services in the communities served by OACs varies considerably and can be difficult for small community organisations to effectively negotiate. This is a significant barrier to bedding down the delivery of government services and programs in this environment. Hence, for government services to be effectively delivered and developed in this environment more consideration needs to be given to how this can be achieved more effectively, otherwise in its current form, government service delivery opportunities may not be able to contribute significantly to the ongoing success of many OACs.

Centrally supported networks may offer the higher levels of confidence needed by agencies to place services with their network members. However, even in those centres where access to government services is provided, this activity generates relatively small levels of financial return when balanced against the cost of obtaining that revenue and actually delivering the service.

Strategy 2 - Funding programs

All tiers of government to identify existing funding programs that could be accessed by existing centres to help address any immediate funding needs – these programs to be promoted to centres.

There have been a number of positive outcomes in relation to Strategy 2 with a range of Australian, state and territory government's funding programs identified and promoted through the Telecentre web pages on the TelInfo website. However, the Working Group notes that there can be a tendency to reward 'capable' communities and not help those lacking the skill to submit successful applications for funding.

Australian Government initiatives

The \$10.1 million *IT Training and Technical Support Program* (RTI Recommendation 5.4), announced on 21 December 2004, has provided a wide range of applicants (including state and territory governments) with funding for basic IT training in very remote Australia. These projects will result in some flow-on benefits in terms of short-term provision of training and facilities for OACs in the very remote areas of Western Australia, South Australia, Northern Territory, New South Wales and Queensland.

The projects funded will build on initiatives established under programs such as NTN and the *Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities* (TAPRIC), and in most instances will make extensive use of OAC infrastructure established under those programs. For example, the \$2.9 million *Future Skilling Outback WA* project (Department of Industry and Resources, WA) proposes extensive IT training and technical support in all very remote regions of Western Australia. It will use the WA Telecentre Network to provide the IT training.

As well as this, the TAPRIC is implementing a range of communications-related programs and strategies, and is working with remote Indigenous communities and other government departments and agencies to achieve realistic and sustainable solutions. Several of the programs will have benefits for OACs in remote Indigenous communities.

- Under the TAPRIC's *Internet Access Program Phase 2*, DCITA is making available computer equipment to selected remote Indigenous communities connecting to a suitable high bandwidth Internet service under the Australian Government's Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme (HiBIS). Phase 1 of the Program provided funding for 135 communities. Applications under Phase 2 are currently being assessed.
- The *Indigenous Communities Online Program* will assist remote Indigenous communities across Australia to develop appropriate community, cultural or educational online resources, according to their needs. Applications are currently being assessed.

Both of these programs have provided significant support for some Indigenous communities. Future programs for support of OACs in these communities are currently under development.

DOTARS administers the Regional Partnerships (RP) program which has provided assistance to a number of OACs including:

- *Mungindi Progress Association Inc (NSW)* - received funding of \$317,375 to establish a Community Service Centre which will house the telecentre funded under the CTC program.
- *Robertson CTC (NSW)* - received funding of \$80,246 to finalise the fit-out and landscaping of the Robertson CTC.
- *Wootton Community Network Inc (NSW)* - received funding of \$32,914 to complete the Wootton Community Resource Centre through the construction of a café and CTC with public access computers and office space.

Although it is open to individual OACs to apply for RP funding, there are caveats:

- Funding is available for specific projects as per the RP guidelines (eg equipment), that have clearly defined outcomes, partnerships, viability and sustainability. However, funding is not provided for on-going operating costs or purposes that would be considered as cost shifting.
- Funding is not available on a state-wide basis.
- OACs are encouraged to work with other OACs (or similar organisations such as RTCs) in their region to identify issues around long-term sustainability.
- The relevant ACC should be consulted in developing any application for funding.

DCITA and the Working Group have been working with DOTARS to encourage the ACCs across Australia to give assistance to OACs in identifying sources of business planning advice. ACCs assist applicants applying for funding through the RP Program. DCITA has provided input on how ACCs can assist with the sustainability of OACs, for inclusion in the weekly email DOTARS forwards to the ACCs. DCITA also provided information on OACs to attendees at a conference of representatives from each of the 56 ACCs in Canberra in 17 March 2005.

The Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) will continue to explore how current initiatives, such as the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy's Local Answers Initiative, the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants Program and the Family and Community Networks Initiative (for Indigenous communities), can provide support to the OACs. The guidelines for these programs do not preclude OACs from applying for funding. However, applications will still need to be competitive and demonstrate that they meet the program criteria to a high degree.

State, territory and local government initiatives

Australian Capital Territory

The Digital Divide program commenced in 2001-02 and was completed in June 2005. The primary initiatives of this program included:

- grants totaling \$581,000 to ACT community organisations, ACT schools and public libraries.
- \$1.43m over 3 years for CITAP.

New South Wales

New South Wales Community Technology Centre (CTC) Program has more than 80 centres which have been jointly funded by the Australian Government (through NTN) and the NSW State Government. Although no new funding has been committed to CTC Network, the NSW Government continued to provide support via a centralised secretariat in the year 2004/2005. The activities of the secretariat have included brokerage of products and services to CTCs, the delivery of a range of IT-based community development projects, and the management and maintenance of the CTC Network website.

Based on fee-for-service, a range of services has been delivered by CTCs on behalf of Government agencies, including targeted activities for seniors, youth, Indigenous groups, women and small business. On 21 June 2005, the Minister for Commerce announced a 'one-off' grant of \$500,000 to the Community Technology Centres Association Inc to provide ongoing business brokerage and advisory support to individual centres as they transition to sustainability.

Northern Territory

The Northern Territory relies heavily on Australian Government programs for funding OACs. Ongoing funding will need to be met from community resources or existing Australian Government programs.

Queensland

The Queensland Government has three significant funding programs (detailed elsewhere in this Report) broadly directed at furthering the purposes envisaged by the OAC concept. Since 1992, the Queensland Government has invested nearly \$50M in programs operating in libraries, community learning facilities and government service delivery centres. These initiatives reflect the difference in approaches across states and territories in meeting the range of community needs able to benefit from ICT. In some cases, such programs provided an established vehicle for the effective investment of NTN funding.

South Australia

The South Australian Government funds community access through the Public and School Community Library Network and through Service SA. While the strategic focus of the recently formed Digital Bridge Unit includes supporting initiatives for people living in rural and regional areas which will help to overcome the impact of the digital divide, there is no funding available to maintain community-based OACs. However, community capacity building programs include supporting Broadband development through the South Australian Government Broadband Development Fund, working with

Coordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund (CCIF) projects, and identifying and supporting community opportunities to access HiBIS resources.

Tasmania

In May 2003, the State Government committed to providing ongoing financial support to the TCO network, with a total of \$1.9million allocated in the 2004-2005 State Budget for the State's 64 OACs and central support.

Victoria

On 3 December 2004, the Victorian Government announced that it would commit \$9 million over four years to address barriers to increase Internet uptake, particularly for disadvantaged communities. *Connecting Communities: the second wave* recognises the critical role of public Internet access in ensuring basic access and skills provision to disadvantaged communities. As part of *Connecting Communities: the second wave* the Victorian Government will provide up to \$3.5 million over four years to support the continued provision of free or affordable public Internet access to disadvantaged groups.

Other initiatives announced as part of *Connecting Communities: the second wave* includes: ongoing support for the Skills.net Roadshow; \$1 million expansion of the *My Connected Community Program*; and the development of a new program to provide introductory Internet training for people with a disability.

Western Australia

Western Australia continues to expand and develop the Telecentre Network with the support of the Australian Government and Rio Tinto by establishing Telecentres in eight remote Indigenous communities and providing a satellite based videoconferencing service in six remote Indigenous communities. This compliments the State Government's commitment in 2005-2006 to inject \$1.98 million into an additional 105 Telecentres across the State in for form of a \$20,000 grant to support wages for 20 hours of operation each week.

The WA State Government also provides all WA Telecentres with access to a central Support Branch to ensure ongoing support and development services are provided to these evolving organisations.

A Review of the overall Telecentre program was completed in 2004, which provides a platform for future developments of these facilities. This Review can be accessed at www.telecentres.wa.gov.au

Local government

Many of the state local government associations have established public Internet access points, with computers and training in numerous council libraries, which the councils are now funding on an ongoing basis. For example, Western Australian councils are supporting 55 Internet access points whilst Northern Territory councils are supporting 42 Internet access points. Many OACs in the Northern Territory are also co-located with community councils.

Summary

The Working Group acknowledges the benefits of OACs accessing a range of funding programs for financial support, as well as new facilities and technologies. However, this sort of funding may not always be available to all OACs and may not meet their need for both capital and recurrent expenditure.

Strategy 3 – Flexibility of existing programs

All tiers of government to explore how relevant existing programs can be made more flexible to support existing online access centres, eg. re-engineering of existing program structures.

The Working Group has investigated options for existing government programs to be made more flexible to support OACs, for example re-engineering program structures. However, the Group has not been able to implement this objective as existing programs generally have established and firm guidelines. These programs cannot be altered to suit the needs of OACs or to discriminate in their favour.

It should be noted however that, broadly speaking, state, territory and local government programs will continue to provide for *some* level of support for the operational costs of the present range of OAC services.

Summary

The Working Group has identified a number of existing funding programs which are currently promoted through the Telecentres web pages. While work under Strategy 3 has been unsuccessful, the achievements in regard to Strategy 2 have been encouraging. All tiers of government should continue to raise awareness of OACs of the existing programs and how they operate.

Strategy 4 – Dissemination of practical information

Australian Government to capture and disseminate useful and practical information to assist the management committees on online access centres.

Telecentre web pages – TelInfo

The Working Group has successfully addressed this strategy through the development of ‘Community Telecentres’ web pages, which have been included as a section in the *TelInfo* website established by DCITA. The web pages allow for information sharing and exchange at the national level.²

The purpose of these web pages is to capture and disseminate useful and practical information on the maintenance of OACs established in rural, regional and remote areas of Australia. The content includes information and case studies that show the ingenuity and entrepreneurship of successful centres, thus providing useful examples from which others may learn. These web pages are intended to support the management committees

² Accessed at http://www.telinfo.gov.au/TC_Help%20tc%20online.htm.

and coordinators who manage and operate the centres, especially those centres that are not part of a large network.

As part of disseminating this information an e-card has been designed to promote the website and sent out to all those OAC managers who provided updated email addresses for the survey conducted by the Working Group. A copy of the e-card is at **Attachment C**.

DCITA will continue to up-date and maintain the Telecentre web pages providing relevant information on existing private, government and non-profit sector initiatives at the local, state/territory and national level. DCITA will look at ways to link these web pages to other relevant organisation portals and websites.

Summary

DCITA will provide ongoing support for the information management services needed to sustain the TelInfo site and will ensure that the functionality of the site keeps pace with changes in technology.

Strategy 5 – Stocktake of OACs funded under NTN

All tiers of government to commence a stocktake of existing centres to get a better understanding of the current status of the centres. It is envisaged that the stocktake would make use of relevant mapping and spatial data tools.

Stocktake

The stocktake was undertaken between October 2004 and May 2005 to determine how many NTN funded OACs were still operational nationally. Updated contact details of these centres were received through the stocktake, which has assisted the concurrent survey.

The work in relation to the stocktake has required extensive resources in order to obtain a level of detail that will provide a valuable and constructive result. A coordinated effort between Working Group representatives, DCITA and coordinators of networked centres has been necessary to ensure that findings are comparable with existing data.

Results

The results indicate at the time of the stocktake that 67% of NTN funded OACs have remained open and operational, while 4% of OACs have closed and 29% were categorised as ‘unknown’ (see **Attachment D** for detailed results). The data also showed that 74% of NTN funded OACs, which were either Indigenous specific sites, or in areas that have a high proportion of Indigenous population, have remained open and operational. Another 2% had closed while 24% had an ‘unknown’ status.

Mapping of the updated status data has been undertaken by DCITA. The mapping of the updated data could be used as a starting point if more work is required to establish remaining areas of need for public Internet access.

Attempting to establish the current status of the almost 2,000 OACs across Australia was a time consuming and resource intensive task as the majority of funding recipients completed reporting requirements under the terms of their funding agreements several years ago. The stocktake results are therefore limited by those OACs classified as status 'unknown'. However, attempting to establish the correct status of these OACs was not possible with the limited resources, and within the available timeframe. In many instances original project officers have moved on, and some centres have relocated or joined other organisations in their area. It is acknowledged that establishing the correct status of the OACs currently classified as 'unknown' would further enhance the final results of the stocktake.

Survey

A sample survey of operational NTN funded OACs was undertaken to test the sustainability of OACs. The survey was designed to enhance the level of detail provided from the stocktake, and included 15 questions that covered operational issues in terms of staffing, hours of operation, services offered, networked status, and user groups (list of survey questions at **Attachment E**).

The survey was a collaborative effort between DCITA and the Working Group Members and was conducted between October 2004 and May 2005.

Results

The survey was distributed to a sample of 1,023 of the 1,822 NTN funded OACs that were identified through the stocktake. Out of the 1,023 operational centres that were surveyed, 351 (34%) responses were received. This comprises 143 (41%) responses from stand-alone centres and 208 (59%) responses from networked centres (which includes centres that are part of state or regional networks and school or library networks). The number of responses received was considered a good response rate in the context of the survey method.³

The responses were analysed to establish trends and findings of the current operational profiles of NTN funded OACs. Attention was paid to the essential requirements that foster sustainability of OACs.

Operational trends in the data show that the majority of OACs who responded to the survey (see **Attachment F** for detailed analysis):

- are located in outer regional areas with populations between 1,000 and 9,000;
- are utilised mostly by seniors, followed by youth;
- are least utilised by people from non-English speaking backgrounds, followed by people with disabilities;
- are part of a state network;
- have been operational for more than five years;

³ Qualified research professionals did not undertake the survey. Therefore, although the results and findings do provide updated details of the operational profiles of a sample of NTN funded OACs, the results and findings are not, and were never intended to be, for official publication or further use outside the Working Group.

- are open between 30 and 40 hours per week;
- collocate with other premises/ services (usually with community centres);
- have one to five computers;
- charge a fee for Internet access;
- receive funding from a government source;
- employ only one paid staff member;
- utilise volunteer assistance, with usually more than five volunteers providing support;
- provide training, both for a fee and for free;
- receive subsidies for the provision of training;
- offer less than 10 business services i.e. photocopying, faxing, video conferencing, etc; and
- are not usually government services delivery agents i.e. Centrelink, ATO, Medicare, etc.

Although the findings of the survey have only drawn from a sample of NTN funded OACs, they have assisted in providing an understanding of the current status and operational profiles of OACs. The findings have also been useful in providing data for comparison with models in other jurisdictions, and to assess evidence in relation to the sustainability of OACs. The results and findings of the survey reflect international research and grass roots experience of the management and operational issues of OACs.

Summary

The analysis of the survey responses is a valuable resource to assist in determining the reach of the NTN funded OACs to date, and to help identify remaining areas of need for these centres. Survey data was available to the Working Group in considering future strategies and policy recommendations for the sustainability of OACs. However, the Working Group also acknowledges that anecdotal responses indicate that many OACs are now finding it difficult to support paid staff and are functioning through volunteer goodwill and the impetus of previously funded activity. This energy can reasonably be expected to decline and the expectation is that many of these OACs will become unoperational without assured ongoing funding.

Strategy 6 - Community participation

State and local governments to develop initiatives to foster and sustain community participation.

Community participation can be broadly described as the process where community members are actively involved in decision making in community activities generally and in promoting meaningful engagement with and ownership of their communities.

In the specific context of OACs, community participation occurs through a range of activities. For example:

- encouraging the use of ICT, in particular the Internet and online services, and thus fostering participation in virtual communities both inside and outside of geographical communities for groups facing constraints in engaging in face-to-face contact;
- providing an opportunity for individuals to participate as volunteers in their communities and thus learning and passing on new skills; and
- promoting community information networks and information sharing, including hosting community and non-profit websites.

The Working Group has identified many current initiatives through which OACs are helping to engage communities and provide individuals and groups with skills to engage with their communities more broadly. All states and territories and the Australian Government have in place a broad range of community development programs and projects to introduce and engage groups and individuals in IT related activities. Many of these are whole of government initiatives which aim to develop community access to online technology.

Australian Government initiatives

Community participation and the development of ICT capacity of all Australians is part of the strategic priorities and strategies of DCITA, contained in *Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006: Challenges for the Information Age*. Specifically, the work of encouraging community participation in OACs relates to:

Strategy 1.1: Develop the networks and capabilities needed by people living in regional communities, Indigenous Australians, older Australians, people with disabilities and others facing economic or social barriers to participation in the information economy; and

Strategy 1.2: Strengthen collaboration and capabilities in SMEs, not-for-profit organisations, and key industry sectors to facilitate their participation in the information economy. (Page 24)

DCITA released two discussion papers in early 2005 to provide an overview and bring together current research in relation to the role of ICT in building communities and social capital and the use of ICT in the non-profit sector. A set of case studies accompanied the papers to illustrate the scope and nature of some social and community applications of ICT. A targeted public consultation process was undertaken to validate this research and to seek stakeholders' views on discussion points raised within the papers. A public report on the consultation process and the main issues and recommendations raised in the submissions received is being prepared, along with a submission to the Minister on the main findings and future directions.

DCITA is also developing an *eStrategy Guide* for non-profit organisations to assist them make more effective use on ICT. The guide will be based on the ebusiness guides and related materials produced by the Department and will draw on prior research and analysis on the use of ICT in the non-profit sector. The guide is expected to be available by the end of 2005.

Local, State and Territory Government Initiatives

Australian Capital Territory

In developing initiatives to suit the various digital divide target groups, the ACT Government's CITAP (Community IT Access Plan) also recognised the importance of developing sustainable initiatives.

Key initiatives aimed at addressing the recognised barriers to connectivity were designed to be inclusive and ongoing. By way of example, the impact of the ACT PC Reuse Scheme and public access to IT through ACT Libraries and community centres should continue to have lasting, positive effects beyond the completion of the program in June 2005.

New South Wales

The CTC Program remains an essential strategy to:

- address the issues of lack of access to services and enhance telecommunications infrastructure and services;
- increase access to, and promote use of services available through telecommunications networks; and
- reduce disparities in access to such services and facilities.

The NSW Government funds a range of community development projects to introduce and engage groups and individuals in IT related activities. These projects target seniors, women, Indigenous groups, youth and business including Seniors Week activities involving software training, an International Women's Day videoconferencing project, and targeted training to CTC managers.

The development of social capital and the direct return to the NSW economy are difficult to determine without further research. However, it can be assumed there is substantial return to NSW in terms of skills development in information technology, usage and access to online information and transactional services, employment, volunteer hours and skills training. The increase in usage of services provided within the CTC environment suggests savings in social service provision.

More recently, CTCs have adopted a community enterprise framework which has supported stronger business planning and development skills. This has led to an increased capacity for communities to work with government, non-government and commercial organisations. A critical success factor is the importance of co-location and partnerships with other agencies or organisations to extend the capability of the CTC through cost and resource efficiencies. Importantly, co-location enables cross-fertilisation of ideas between the groups co-located and the leveraging of skills resources to deliver services and programs that might not otherwise be managed by a single organisation.

The recently established Community Technology Centres Association provides a single point of contact to manage the implementation of service delivery across country NSW and extends the community participation in the process.

Queensland

The Queensland Government funds a range of initiatives that aim to build community participation, provide access to services and address community ICT needs. Well established and ongoing structures such as QGAP, LNQ and country libraries contribute significantly by providing service delivery, training and public access in rural and remote Queensland communities.

For example, the 68 QGAP sites mentioned previously, supported by \$29.7 million of State funding (1992-2005), provide access to government information, advice and services in very small communities (population under 3,000) across Queensland. A further \$17 million has contributed to the support of LNQ's facilities since 1990, providing services to approximately 22,000 community members using LNQ facilities, including outreach services to extremely remote sites, each year. *The Online Public Access in Libraries* (OPAL) project, a \$4.3 million State Library of Queensland project, addresses equity of Internet access for Queenslanders who do not have access to a personal Internet connection. OPAL has also contributed significantly to the development of online skills and knowledge in Queensland communities.

Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs), a further initiative of the State Library of Queensland, provide a model of community access for Indigenous communities that is based on cooperation between the State Library and local community councils. IKCs can vary from a traditional library to a centre for cultural revitalisation, which involves community members in developing content around family history, language, land and customary law. IKCs also provide a centre for support of employment, economic development, health and housing needs.

There are currently 9 IKCs in operation, with three more to be completed this year. The Queensland Government provides \$69,000 to establish each IKC, with a further \$14,000 per IKC per year provided from the State Library of Queensland for ongoing support such as library collections and program development, and approximately \$300,000 per year in-kind support to address the costs of staff, travel, IT and other expenses. Training for unemployed Indigenous people is provided through the 33-week *IKC Training and Support Program*, which was funded by a \$173,000 State Government grant.

Many Queensland Government-funded programs play an important role in fostering and sustaining broad-based community participation in ICT:

- *Technology Survival Skills* (\$750,000) - Up to \$10,000 each is made available to Queensland non-profit organisations to run projects that enhance the ICT skills of community members who are disadvantaged in their access to ICT training due to, but not limited to, their income level, location, age, gender or disability.
- *Community ICT Skills Development* (\$750,000) - The Community ICT Skills Development program aimed to increase ICT skills in community organisations in small rural, regional and remote communities.
- *ICT Innovators Grants* - ICT Innovators Grants include funding for innovative projects that extend community access to ICTs in schools and improve access to ICTs for under-represented student groups. Almost \$830,000 was distributed to 39 State schools and their communities in 2003–2004. A further seventy-one State schools and their communities will share in more than \$750,000 in 2004-2005.

- *Community Access to ICTs in Schools (CAICTS)* - CAICTS is a collaborative project between Education Queensland and the Brisbane City Council which began in 2002. In that year, basic computer and Internet training were offered to 37 schools, with over 1,550 graduates of the Program. In 2003, 32 schools in the Brisbane area participated. Approximately 1,850 people were expected to complete one or more of the courses on offer.

More broadly, programs such as the Queensland Department of Housing's *Community Renewal* include reference to Community ICT as one of several key results areas. *Community Renewal* partners with residents, business, and community and government agencies in 19 nominated Queensland communities experiencing significant social and economic stress, to deliver new solutions to local issues. The ICT strand of the program focuses on mobility, access and communication networks, and aims to connect people, places, programs and activities.

South Australia

Two existing collaborative programs include the *Wangka Wilurrara Project* which provides a focus for community access, training and web usage in the Indigenous communities of Eyre Peninsula. The South Australian Government has made significant and on-going contributions to this and to *Outback Connect*, a project of the Australian Government IT Training and Technical Support fund, which will support OACs in very remote regions of South Australia and develop community ICT capacity.

Through the SA Government's Digital Bridge Unit a number of pilot projects have been funded to support and assess the effectiveness of community capacity building initiatives in Information Technology. These include:

- IT Healthchecks – an initiative of Community Information Strategies Australia Inc (CSIA) providing free audits of IT systems and capability for small non-profit organisations and micro businesses particularly, but not exclusively, those from regional areas. This program also offers IT implementation support services and training programs. The pilot will be assessed in June 2005.
- IT "Communityships" – provision of subsidised IT traineeships for the Not For Profit (NFP) sector to develop the ongoing digital capacity and online service delivery of organisations in this sector.

The purpose of these initiatives is to generate an effective ICT function for the non-profit sector and to develop online capacity and interaction with clients and stakeholders.

It is important to acknowledge that, where OACs development in rural and regional areas has been a focus of funding programs such as NTN, there is a pressing need for programs supporting public access to the Internet for marginalised sectors in metropolitan areas. In South Australia, programs addressing this need include *NetWorking the North*, a multi-jurisdictional approach to ICT implementation and community access, focusing on business development and community-based digital bridge programs in the northern suburbs of Adelaide.

Whole of government initiatives which aim to develop community access to online technology include:

- Web accessibility workshops and community of practice, developing government and community awareness and standards for access to web based services for all.
- *Barriers to e-learning* - research project which focuses on community sectors which have traditionally been slow to access online learning opportunities.

Tasmania

Community capacity building has been fundamental to the TCO Program in Tasmania since its inception in 1998. All centres are either community-managed or administered through the Department of Education with strategic support and oversight provided by a local advisory committee. Many volunteer committee members have acquired grant application and report writing experience skills and learned how to manage a community organisation and over the years many have moved on to become instrumental in other unrelated community ventures.

In many cases, centres themselves have become community meeting places, resource centres and provide support to increasing numbers of community groups. All are instrumental in promoting their local communities and some now find themselves proactively facilitating community partnerships, bringing together groups with like interests in an effort to increase communication and minimise duplication of effort and dilution of funding and other resources.

Particular initiatives include:

- *Volunteer Program* - The TCO network has a strong program for the recruitment, management and training of volunteers assisting to build strong community commitment to and participation in the OACs. In 2004, some 600 volunteers contributed over 13,000 working days in support of Centre operations. These are in addition to the over 400 volunteers serving on Centre committees.
- *Education and Training partnerships* - Through a partnership with TAFE Tasmania and other registered training providers, OACs support and promote a number of nationally accredited education and training opportunities. Being flexibly delivered in the local community, there has been a significant uptake by the Tasmanian community of these entry level courses. For many people, these “second chance” education and training opportunities have provided a pathway to employment, further study and new interests often as volunteers in their OAC.
- *A web presence showcasing each community* - OACs in Tasmania have been particularly active in gathering information about and working with their local community. All centres maintain a comprehensive community website showcasing their local community, including businesses, services, attractions, tourist information, community groups and local history.
- *Tasmania’s CommunityNet (TCN)* - Since 2002, the TCO Program has maintained a comprehensive online directory of non-profit community organisations throughout the State. Groups listed in TCN can edit their own record online and add downloadable documents such as membership applications, meeting agendas, minutes and brochures. OACs promote the service to local community groups, assist new users to access the online database and provide quality assurance for entries in their area.

Several local councils also obtain data feeds directly from TCN so that they can rebrand the information and re-display it on their council websites. A project to integrate TCN with Tourism Tasmania's events calendar is currently underway, which will allow groups to publicise meetings or any other public or members-only event.

Victoria

The Victorian Government's *Connecting Communities: the second wave* strategy is a comprehensive framework to address the key barriers to uptake of the Internet experienced by disadvantaged communities by providing:

- access to technology;
- skills to use technology; and
- access to content and applications of relevance.

Connecting Communities: the second wave recognises the critical role of public Internet access in ensuring basic access and skills provision to disadvantaged communities including:

- senior Victorians (including seniors from non-English speaking backgrounds);
- recent migrants;
- unemployed Victorian and those outside the education system and workforce (including disadvantaged youth); and
- people with a disability.

As part of *Connecting Communities: the second wave*, the Government is implementing a range of initiatives aimed at increasing uptake and fostering community participation and engagement including:

- *My Connected Community*, which provides community organisations with tools and support to establish online communities;
- *Skills.net Roadshow*, which delivers Internet training to community organisations in settings in which they are most comfortable;
- *Public Internet Access Program*, which provides funding to support the continued provision of free or affordable public Internet access to disadvantaged groups; and
- Development of a new program to provide Internet training for people with a disability.

Western Australia

The Western Australian Government has over time developed a variety of means to facilitate the improvement of community access to ICT and associated training opportunities in a State with regional communities spread across such a large geographic area.

There are nine non-metropolitan regions in Western Australia, the Kimberley, Pilbara, Gascoyne, Mid West, Wheatbelt, Goldfields-Esperance, Great Southern, South West and Peel Regions. A Regional Development Commission is established in all regions, with each taking a broad outlook on regional development issues confronting their area of the State. Each Commission has tackled the issue of developing telecommunications infrastructure by examining in more detail the existing infrastructure to try and determine future development needs and opportunities.

Existing programs designed to support the ongoing development of ICT skills and access includes:

- The Department of Local Government and Regional Development, which supports a network of over 105 Telecentres with annual grants to assist in their operation and provides a support service to assist in their ongoing operation.
- The Department of Education and Training, which offering the 2005 *First Click* and *Second Click Program*. This Program offers communities the opportunity to access grants to assist with accredited or unaccredited basic level and more advanced ICT training.⁴
- TAFE colleges across the State, which provide a wide range of courses to up-skill people in the use of ICT. In a number of regions in smaller communities, without immediate access to a TAFE facility, Telecentres arrange these courses and enrol people on contract with TAFE.
- Lotterywest, which provides access to a range of ICT equipment and capacity building grants.⁵
- The provision of Telecentre Access Points (TAPS) in 37 communities, which do not have the capacity to support a full-time Telecentre. These are either a coin operated Internet Booth or a suite of computer(s), printer, scanner and Internet access.
- Local governments across the State, which provide a local fully - staffed library facility. The Library Information Service of Western Australia provides public library collections of catalogued books and other materials, and facilitates the provision of the widest range of information services to the people of Western Australia through a State-wide network of public libraries managed by local government. In a number of cases these facilities provide Internet access to enhance the capacity of a community's capacity to access information and undertake research online.

Local government

Local government undertakes a number of activities to promote community participation in OACs. In many cases, the local council hosts the centre as well as providing secretariat support to the OACs administration committee.

OACs are promoted actively throughout the community by councils. Some councils have produced publications promoting the existence of the Centre and the services it offers.

Summary

The work of encouraging community participation is ongoing and long-term work. This work will encompass a broad range of activities and initiatives through all tiers of government, as well as the involvement of the non-profit and private sector. In noting the existing commitment of state, territory and local governments to supporting ongoing

⁴ Information is available at www.training.wa.gov.au.

⁵ These can be accessed at www.lotterywest.wa.gov.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=415.

community engagement with ICT, the Working Group points to the following mechanisms for fostering that support.

- The current and evolving role of OACs in the adoption and effective use of ICT across communities has linkages with DCITA's community ICT transformation work, and may be further pursued in this context.
- It may also be appropriate for the role of OACs in community and regional development, and in lifelong learning, to be raised by states and territories in the appropriate Ministerial forums.
- State and territory agencies with responsibility for OACs should continue to work closely with those agencies in their own jurisdictions which have responsibility for issues such as community and regional development, e-government, education and training, as well as utilise funding through their existing programs where appropriate.
- All levels of government should continue to consult widely on the role of OACs in supporting broader social policy objectives (eg, life long learning initiatives).

Strategy 7 - Private sector participation

All tiers of government to develop initiatives to foster private sector participation through local businesses.

Private sector participation in OACs is being encouraged through the use of centres by businesses as customers and other service providers, as well as sponsors and in partnership relationships. The Working Group has identified a number of areas where governments can assist OACs to foster private sector participation, not only through local businesses, but through partnerships and collaborations with large corporate players with an interest in encouraging broad community access to new and emerging technologies.

The Working Group also considered the ability of OACs to attract the support of philanthropic and corporate sponsors. OACs are not a coherent entity likely to attract support at a national level from major corporations. However, it is possible that states with well established OAC networks (eg Western Australia, NSW and Tasmania) could attract support from significant corporate organisations in their states.

Governments are well placed to act as a coordinator, facilitator and broker for partnerships between industry and the non-profit (community) sector. The Working Group acknowledges that this can be a very complicated and time-consuming process which does not always guarantee success.

Australian Government initiatives

Successful partnerships have been formed, and recognised through the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships (CBPs), such as that between Cisco Systems and The Smith Family and the partnership between Hume Global Learning Centre and *The Age*, which provides educational and vocational resources, including online resources. Other partnerships have also been identified and

encouraged through those Awards including the partnership between the Inspire Foundation, Microsoft and the Coca-Cola Australia Foundation which developed a network of Beanbag Net centres.

Unlimited Potential (UP) program

Microsoft Australia is partnering with community organisations The Smith Family, the Inspire Foundation, Workventures, Yarrteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation and Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA), to provide more than \$40 million over five years to build a network of community technology learning centres (CTLCS) around the country. Around 100 CTLCS are operating in cities, suburban and rural area supporting local communities.

There could be value in the formation of linkages between OACs and CTLCS, at a national, state and local level, so as to:

- develop (where practicable) collaborative approaches; and
- share information, ideas, experience and best practice on fostering and sustaining community participation and support, and on maintaining/enhancing the sustainability/viability of centres.

Mr Roger Boot of The Smith Family, who is the UP project manager, presented to a Working Group meeting, information on the UP program. Details of this program are located on the new 'Community Telecentres' web pages on *Telinfo*.

The Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) funded the Victorian social enterprise *Our Community*, working in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), to develop and manage a *National Community and Business Partnerships Brokerage Service*. This service is for community groups and businesses, particularly small to medium sized organisations, who want to form community business partnerships.

State and territory initiatives

New South Wales

CTCs have engaged well with local business and liaised successfully with organisations such as their local Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Business products include the development of web pages and business services, including desktop publishing. IT based training programs either delivered by the CTC Manager or through the Adult and Community Education provider or TAFE have been valuable to small business operators, individuals and community groups. CTCs in six communities produce community newspapers and newsletters, which not only provide a sound community service but generate substantial revenue.

Other initiatives include the successful partnership between WorkVentures, the NSW Department of Housing, and companies such as IBM, Microsoft and Westpac to develop Neighbourhood Technology Centres in public housing estates. Furthermore, there has been the recent creation of BootUp Internet Cafes for disadvantaged groups living in areas of inner-Sydney as a result of a partnership between the not-for-profit

BootUp organisation, Sydney City Council, Rotary Clubs and the Australian Computer Society.

Queensland

Queensland Government partnerships with major corporate organisations provide strong examples of effective cross-sectoral collaboration. The State Library of Queensland, for example, in partnership with BHP Billiton, Telstra Country Wide and IPEX Information Technology Group has delivered free community Internet training and education to over 6,200 participants. The State Library of Queensland staff deliver the training in a team-training role, and public libraries in each town provide the primary local community contact.

BHP Billiton contributed \$575,000 to the program over three years, which was known as the BHP Billiton Skills.net Roadshow. The cooperation of local government also greatly assisted community members in more than 60 rural, regional and remote communities across Queensland to participate in this program. The Skills.net Roadshow was originally a Victorian Government initiative.

A further example of successful partnerships is the Queensland Government's collaboration with CISCO, Telstra and Austar in the provision of a community and youth facility for the Palm Island (Torres Strait) community.

South Australia

In South Australia, available corporate/philanthropic support is being investigated; however, it is acknowledged that this support is limited in less populous states with limited economic and corporate resources.

A structured, long-term and multi-jurisdictional funding commitment is needed, which addresses the needs of smaller resourced states.

Tasmania

Many OACs in Tasmania have been proactively providing assistance to local businesses in rural and remote communities for several years, focussed primarily on small and home-based businesses that would otherwise not have taken advantage of opportunities enabled through the Internet. Initiatives include:

- Entry-level web page development and hosting (with sites being migrated to commercial web hosting services as they mature).
- Introduction to e-commerce (including the *ecAware Program* in partnership with the Tasmanian Electronic Commerce Centre).
- Promotion of the *BizTas* directory (a single Internet access point to information about registered Tasmanian businesses and organisations, allowing each business to their own record online) This website is located at www.biztas.com.
- Desktop publishing and secretarial services.
- IT skills training for local employers, including in some cases employer-funded retraining of non-skilled staff facing redundancy.

- Several centres publish successful self-sustaining community newspapers.

In Tasmania's experience, the primary benefits are in supporting growth of local businesses and building local capacity, rather than as a source of income for OACs. While entrepreneurial in nature, initiatives targeted at local businesses have generally ended up cost neutral to centres, with only a few of the larger centres generating any significant net income.

Victoria

The Victorian Government has recently undertaken research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthropic activities in Victoria as part of its review of the *Connecting Communities* framework. This research indicated there are many examples of innovative projects which have been supported by the corporate and philanthropic sectors working in partnership with non-profit groups and, in some cases, government, to help disadvantaged groups gain access to the Internet through new and emerging technologies.

For example, the WellCONNECTED project currently being piloted in Victoria is a partnership between the Victorian Government, the Royal Children's Education Institute and Telstra Countrywide. This project is examining the benefits of providing laptops at home to improve the educational and social outcomes of young people who experience periods of absence from school due to a chronic medical condition.

The research further indicated there is a potential to increase the level of this activity in Victoria and that the State Government is well-placed to act as a coordinator, facilitator and broker for these types of projects. As part of *Connecting Communities: the second wave*, the Minister for Information and Communication Technology announced that the Victorian Government would develop models to improve the coordination of philanthropic, corporate and non-profit support to assist disadvantaged groups in the Victorian community to access innovative technologies and solve local problems. The Victorian Government is currently progressing this issue in discussion with key philanthropic and ICT companies.

Western Australia

The Western Australian Telecentre Network is working closely with the recently formed Western Australian Community Foundation to examine opportunities for the development of locally based foundations around Telecentres, that will build financial support for these facilities and the wider community they serve.

Additionally, the central Telecentre Support Branch is exploring the range of options available through the private sector for contracted business opportunities and access to the *most* appropriate philanthropic support.

Summary

The benefits of encouraging private sector use of and partnerships with OACs have been to provide both financial and in-kind support, as well as new facilities and technologies. While private business participation (from the experience of many OACs) does not seem to be a sufficient income generator to sustain OACs, these

business initiatives and services listed above do position OACs as much needed service providers and thus key organisations within regional communities.

SECTION 3: FUTURE ISSUES

The Working Group acknowledges that the strategies and activities described in this Report will not fully address longer term issues facing OACs such as ongoing operational costs, providing access to new and more efficient information technologies and identifying emerging needs into the future. Both OACs and community ICT needs have evolved since initial funding was granted to community Internet access under the NTN Program, and it is predicted that the services and resources provided by OACs will continue to change in the future.

Policy links and objectives

The Working Group, through progressing strategies for OAC sustainability, has identified several broad government policy objectives which can be addressed by OACs as a continuing and future resource for communities.

Social capital building

The DCITA report, *The Role of ICT in Building Communities and Social Capital* examines the social and economic role which the community or non-profit sector plays in Australian society and its interaction with the information economy. ICT has an impact on how community, business and government agencies, organisations and groups interact with each other and with citizens, clients and customers. There is a strong business case for non-profit organisations to adopt and apply ICT, particularly the Internet.

The Working Group agrees that the role that OACs play in fostering and strengthening social capital can not be over emphasised. In particular, the importance of public Internet access for disadvantaged communities has been recognised in the Victorian Government's social policy action plan, *A Fairer Victoria*, aimed at addressing disadvantage in Victoria.

Building ICT skills and capabilities

OACs across Australia play an important role in training individuals and groups in basic ICT skills. Previous discussion in this Report, on program delivery and community and private sector participation, illustrates the range of government involvement in providing ICT training through OACs. Furthermore, in the survey conducted by DCITA, 81 per cent of OAC respondents said that they provided some kind of ICT training.

Skills training in ICT is a broad policy objective that the Australian Government has articulated in many areas, including education and employment. It has also addressed this specifically in the report entitled *Enabling our Future: A Framework for the Information and Communications Technology Industry*. This report highlights several key elements regarding the skills required in an information economy:

...a broad basic level of ICT skills is required by individuals to participate effectively in the information economy and to enable Australian society to obtain maximum benefit from ubiquitous ICT devices and services. (Department of Communications, IT and the Arts, 2003:44)

The Australian Government's *Strategic Framework for the Information Economy* (SFIE, 2004) highlighted that:

...basic ICT skill proficiency is increasingly being recognised as an essential third life skill alongside literacy and numeracy. (Page 6)

And Priority 1 in the SFIE is:

Ensure that all Australians have the capabilities, networks and tools to participate in the benefits of the information economy. (Page 26)

Skills are also identified as a priority issue in the Government's *National Broadband Strategy (2004)*:

...individuals, organisations and communities will only engage in the information economy when they have the necessary tools and knowledge, and possess the skills to apply these tools and knowledge in a meaningful way. (Page 12)

Much of the research which has focused on the unique role and impacts of OACs shows that their importance goes far beyond providing simple technology access to those in the community who have none. As OACs mature, their role may broaden to embrace concepts of life-long learning and to act as catalyst for the take-up of new ICT skills, interests and as pathways to employment and further education and training.

Internet access and use in Australia

According to recent Nielsen data, collected in the third quarter of 2004, 61% of households had Internet access at home, while 84% of adults (aged 16+) had general Internet access. Sixty-three per cent of adults with access used the Internet at home, 45% at work, 37% at an educational institution, and 38% elsewhere. In the six months to September 2004, Internet users aged 16+ participated in a range of online activities, the most popular being sending and receiving electronic mail (92%). Sixty-eight per cent of households had homes with PCs.

However, despite the general availability and access to PCs and the Internet by the Australian population, there are many factors which create barriers for individuals, groups and communities in accessing the Internet and obtaining a basic skill base to use information technologies.

- *Income* - Analysis of personal income shows that Internet use is highly correlated to levels of disposable income. In June 2003, more than 90% of persons earning in excess of \$100,000 used the Internet, while only 36% of persons with a personal income from \$10,000 to \$14,000.
- *Employment* - Workforce status impacts on the levels of Internet use an individual may have. In June 2003 persons with full-time employment have significantly higher levels of Internet use (75%) than part-time workers (66%) and persons not working (45%).
- *Education* - Higher educational levels equate with higher rates of Internet access. In June 2003 the highest level of Internet use was recorded amongst persons with

a tertiary qualification (85%). However, between June 2001 and June 2003 the level internet use increased significantly irrespective of educational attainment.

- *Age* - Age is a significant indicator of IT and Internet use. For example, in June 2003 only 29% of people aged 55 or over had accessed the Internet in the last month, compared to 79% of 18 to 24 year olds. In fact, overall the statistics show that Internet usage decreased in relation to age.
- *Indigenous communities* – There was a marked difference in the use of IT between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in the week preceding the 2001 census. The census found that home computer use by Indigenous persons was 18% compared to 44% in the non-Indigenous population. Further, Internet use amounted to 9% of the Indigenous population compared to 29% of non-Indigenous population. Internet use overall was 16% of Indigenous population and 39% in the non-Indigenous population (see National Office of Information Economy, 2003 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

Besides the information generated by the Working Group from NTN funded OACs, there have been local and international research and evaluations of public Internet access programs which have highlighted the continuing need for these centres in communities. This research is focused on several themes including understanding OAC user group profiles, highlighting the role of OACs in developing ICT Skills and access to training, and the broader social and economic impacts of ICT capability.

In general, disadvantaged user groups are attracted to OACs for a number of reasons including low cost or free access to ICT and broadband, convenient location with other relevant services, and the provision of training and technical support. OACs attract users to come to centres to learn general computer skills and to use those skills to communicate with family and friends.

It is not just those with no access at home or work to a PC or Internet connection who are attracted to OACs. Centres offer individuals IT skills training and general IT technological support which can not be obtained by users in a home environment.

Although much more difficult to quantify, OACs are having a positive economic impact on the communities they serve. For example, in the 2003 evaluation of the Tasmanian TCO Program it was estimated that, of the \$12.8 million investment by the Australian Government and Tasmanian Government, there had been a direct return to the Tasmanian economy exceeding \$26.2 million in terms of locally sourced goods and services, employment, volunteer hours, skills training and access to employment opportunities for users.

The evaluation also intimated that the Program may be producing considerable indirect savings to health, justice and social service expenditure (Department of Education, 2003:1). Also, the Telecentre Network in Western Australian has calculated that it is returning approximately \$1 in terms of revenue, grants, and payments for every \$1 spent by the State Government (Department of Local Government and Regional Development, 2004:24).

The Working Group recognises that OACs are currently contributing to basic ICT skills training across Australia. Furthermore, the centres are a resource which can be

used by governments for reaching disadvantaged communities as well as providing general training to those groups who cannot access traditional educational avenues because of location and/or social/cultural barriers.

Access to Broadband and applications

The Australian Government's National Broadband Strategy has been focused on providing broadband access to several areas including regional, rural and remote areas. OACs often act as a conduit for broadband take-up, providing individuals and groups with opportunities to access the benefits of broadband, leading to further demand within the communities for other points of access. There is the opportunity for DCITA and state and territory agencies to work through projects funded under the *Coordinated Communications Infrastructure Fund* and the *Demand Aggregators Network*, to raise the awareness of the capacity of OACs to provide this role and as a potential location for teleworking.

The *Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme* (HiBIS) may also have potential benefits for OACs. HiBIS is a \$107.8 million initiative of the Australian Government providing registered Internet service providers with incentive payments to supply higher bandwidth services in regional, rural and remote areas at prices comparable to those available in metropolitan areas. It is open to not-for-profit organisations that intend to provide public access Internet facilities.

Internationally policy debate around broadband is increasingly shifting to application issues. Network convergence and rapid diffusion of high-speed broadband has shifted attention towards broadband content and applications that promise new business opportunities, growth and employment. In Australia, there is a shift in focus away from how to supply broadband services towards exploitation of the potential of broadband to improve the delivery of services nationally.

Access to online services and e-Government

OACs can provide an important resource for the delivery of government services online. The Australian Government has made a commitment to developing e-Government, a term used to describe the use of available and emerging technologies to create a citizen-focused government for the benefit of all Australians.

This commitment was reflected in the 2002 vision for Government online service delivery, *Better Services, Better Government*. Through this strategy the Government is seeking:

...to harness the benefits of more widespread use of, and familiarity with, online services by the broader Australian community, as well as by government itself.
(National Office of Information Economy, 2002:2)

In a recent report entitled *Australian's Use of and Satisfaction with E-Government Services*, several reasons were pinpointed as to why Internet users did not use the Internet to make contact with government. The most significant deterrent to Internet use was the fact that people thought (rightly or wrongly) that the contact could not be done online. Almost a quarter of people (23%) cited this reason. Another 12% did not feel sufficiently familiar with using computers or the Internet in general, or did not

have a computer or Internet access (Australian Government Information Management Office, 2005:36-38).

The Working Group believes that the majority of OACs across Australia are well placed to support community members in gaining the skills to access government services. They are also well placed to provide a basic awareness of e-Government and the kinds of services available. Not only can OACs provide a means of addressing the technical issue of access, but they can also provide disadvantaged groups, who are more likely to have to use government services, with the basic skills to access these services. As a recent discussion paper *Connecting the Dots: Accessing E-Government* has stated:

The groups who are most dependent on government services are currently those who are least likely to have the knowledge and resources to use online services. Technical expansion of e-government must go hand in hand with initiatives to enhance the capacity of disadvantaged citizens to access online services. (Dugdale, Daly, Papandrea and Maley, 2002: Synopsis)

Future viability of OACs

From the discussion and evidence put forward in this Report, the Working Group has shown that OACs are making a significant contribution in the communities in which they serve in terms of social and economic value. In turn, the Working Group considers there is a strong argument for continuing support for these initiatives.

The Working Group has identified a number of risk factors for OACs –

- *Non-networked and stand-alone centres.* Many states and territories have non-networked stand alone OACs which would benefit from being included in a larger support system.
- *Remote OACs and those located in small communities.* Even in networked centres, with strong centralised co-ordination, a minimum ongoing operation funding amount will be necessary for survival because of location and population size.
- *Indigenous centres.* Indigenous communities which have OACs, or would benefit from OACs, have limited economic resources to support the ongoing operation of such centres.
- *Other disadvantaged communities.* In particular, OACs that provide services to low income earners and/or are located in low socioeconomic regions have limited funds and are unable to draw on the financial resources of the users of their services.

Indigenous OACs

OACs servicing Indigenous communities represent a small but important segment of the OAC infrastructure created under NTN funding. The stocktake conducted by the Working Group results show that, of the 1,822 NTN OAC locations, 401 (22%) could be identified as either Indigenous projects or were in areas categorised as Indigenous localities.

Indigenous OACs have similar issues in terms of sustainability as other OACs in regional areas. However many of these issues are intensified because of the general disadvantage of Indigenous communities in terms of educational and employment opportunities. This in turn reduces the advantages Indigenous people take from having access to new ICT (Daly, 2005:13). As a result, extra support in terms of specific funding models and strategies is required to help operate OACs in these often remote locations and to engage these communities in their use.

The Working Group notes that the Indigenous Telecommunications Services Working Group (ITSWG), which was established on 19 March 2004 by Online Council Officials, has in its terms of reference a requirement to: “provide a coordinated national approach to telecommunications services in Indigenous communities throughout Australia by providing a mechanism for the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to coordinate policy and initiatives”.

Success factors to consider

Future support for OACs should be considered in the light of those success factors which have been identified through the experience of government, both in Australia and internationally, in the support of OAC programs and networks.

The experience of the NTN Program suggests that there are a number of identifiable factors which are fundamental to maintaining the viability of OACs. These include:

- *location* - co-location with other community service outlets and providers can generate a critical mass in terms of patronage of the centre, and this is also a means of spreading cost overheads;
- *fee-for-service* - delivering government and commercial services for the community provides an opportunity for centres to generate fee-for-service revenue streams (although care should be taken to make sure that the services provided by community OACs remain clear of any competition policy issues);
- *management expertise* - including the involvement of local champion/s and the development of future local champions;
- *volunteers* - the capacity of a centre to draw upon a stable pool of volunteers and the work of volunteers can be a critical element of a centre’s success;
- *coordinated support* - eg. support from State Governments in WA, NSW, and Tasmania have seen the merit of providing central co-ordination of ‘centres’ in their jurisdictions. This management support and administration may be a crucial factor in the ongoing successful operation of a ‘centre’;
- *business approach* - revenue sources and the mix and type of services offered (enterprise/entrepreneurial focus), as well as a business plan that factors in the current and future dynamics of a centre’s activities;
- *community ownership & partnership* – successful centres consolidate community capacity building through establishing a sense of community ownership and therefore are able to generate social capital. Centres need to be owned, planned,

resourced and implemented in partnership with other key stakeholders, including government, community groups, businesses and industry sectors;

- *commitment* - community projects need a high level of commitment as well as project management skills, knowledge and processes in order to achieve their outcomes;
- *networking* - centres also benefit from a support network that can facilitate an exchange of ideas, information and resources.

Research and evaluations, both local and international, show that some ongoing operational funding is an important component in keeping OACs open and effective in attracting further revenue streams.

CONCLUSION

The Working Group, through this report has identified some of the past, present and future roles of OACs in the Australian community. The report shows the work that has been done by the Working Group to develop implement a number of short and long term strategies to improve the sustainability of OACs. This work represents the completion of the Australian Government's response to RTI Recommendation 5.5 in regard to Online Access Centres.

OACs are continuing to develop and effectively respond to the changing needs and requirements of local communities and new technologies. The Working Group concludes that it is paramount that all tiers of government should work together to continue to find ways to support the ICT and community infrastructure that OACs represent, especially those Centres that are servicing individuals, groups and communities who continue to experience barriers in accessing these facilities.

Australia now has an extensive national network of teleservice centres that should be recognised and valued as a unique and irreplaceable national resource. If used strategically it has the potential to provide opportunity for programs and services to be delivered consecutively to almost all rural and remote communities throughout the nation (Geiselhart, 2004:24).

The Working Group strongly recommends that the Online Council of Ministers consider the issues discussed in this Report which provide some future directions in continuing the efforts of a whole of government approach to sustainable OACs. The Group has clearly identified the range and variety of community needs and services that can be met by OACs. These needs fall within the portfolio responsibilities of a number of government departments and agencies at the state and federal levels. Online Council Ministers may wish to consider working with these organisations to develop a range of mechanisms to address the viability of OACs.

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) 'Use of information technology by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples', *Year Book Australia*.
- Australian Government Information Management Office (2005) *Australians' Use of and Satisfaction with E-Government Service*.
- Daly, A.E. (2005) *Bridging the Digital Divide: The Role of Community Online Access Centres in Indigenous Communities*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- Department of Communications IT and the Arts (2002) *Connecting Regional Australia* Report of the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry ('Estens Report').
- Department of Communications IT and the Arts (2003) *Enabling our Future: A Framework for the Information and Communications Technology Industry: the report of the Framework for the Future Steering Committee to the Minister of DCITA*.
- Department of Communications IT and the Arts (2004) *Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006: Challenges for the Information Age*.
- Department of Communications IT and the Arts (January 2005) *The Role of ICT in Building Communities and Social Capital: a discussion paper*.
- Department of Communications, IT, and the Arts (2005) *Australia Online: 3rd Quarter 2004 Statistics*, available at [www.dcita.gov.au/ data/assets/pdf file/19186/05020014 POCKET STATS.pdf](http://www.dcita.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/19186/05020014_POCKET_STATS.pdf).
- Department of Education, Tasmania (2003) *Local Access Global Reach: An Evaluation of the Tasmanian Communities Online Program*.
- Department of Local Government and Regional Development, Western Australia (2004) *The Western Australian Telecentre Network: Planning for the Future*.
- Dugdale, A., Daly, A., Papandrea, F. and Maley, M. (2004) *Connecting the Dots: Accessing E-Government*, Discussion Paper No. 16.
- Geiselhart, K. (2004) *The Electronic Canary: Sustainability Solutions for Australian Teleservice Centres*.
- National Office of Information Economy (1998) *Australian Government's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy: identifying priorities for action* (SFIE).
- National Office of Information Economy (2002) *Better Services, Better Government: the Federal Government's e-government strategy*.
- National Office of Information Economy (2003) *The Current State of Play: Online Participation and Activities*.

National Office of Information Economy (February 2004) *National Broadband Strategy*, available online at www.dcita.gov.au/ie/publications/2004/march/australian_national_broadband_strategy.